FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA
UNIVERZITY KARLOVY
V PRAZE

ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's *The Brazen Serpent*: A Contextual Analysis

Rozbor básnické sbírky Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin *Nestoudný had*

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Zpracovala: Alžběta Skrbková

Studijní obor: Anglistika a amerikanistika

Praha, květen 2010

vedoucí bakalářské práce: Doc. Justin Quinn, PhD

Prohlašuji, žě jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně a pouze na základě uvedených pramenů a literatury./ I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned.

……..

V Praze dne 31.05.2010/ Prague, 31.05.2010

To assist me in the following analysis of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's collection *The Brazen Serpent* I am immensely grateful to have had the opportunity to personally meet and conduct an interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin herself during her visit to Prague in November 2008. I also greatly appreciate the kind advice and cooperation of Dr. Aidan O'Malley of the University of Limerick faculty who introduced me to Ní Chuilleanáin's work during my Erasmus studies in Ireland in the spring semester of 2008. Above all I am grateful for the valuable assistance of my supervisor for this project, Charles University Associate Professor Doc. Justin Quinn, PhD.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům./ I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

……..

Rozbor básnické sbírky Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin *Nestoudný had*

Shrnutí bakalářské práce v českém jazyce

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin je současnou irskou básnířkou, spisovatelsky činnou od sedmdesátých let minulého století, kdy byla vydána její první sbírka básní s názvem *Akty a monumenty*. Od té doby vydala sedm dalších sbírek a také množství překladů z italštiny, rumunštiny a irštiny. Konkrétní sbírka, kterou zkoumá tato práce nese název *Nestoudný had* a je Ní Chuilleanáininou osmou v pořadí. *Nestoudný had* je považován v irském kontextu za poměrně záhadný, komplexní a tajemný soubor poezie, do něhož je těžko proniknout. Na první pohled by se totiž mohlo zdát, že básně hovoří převážně o klášterním životě, víře, naději, biblických postavách, jeptiškách, církvi a o náboženství jako takovém. Ve skutečnosti je však *Nestoudný had* mnohovrstevnatou sbírkou, která poodhaluje další škály složitých a souvislých významů čím blíže ji zkoumáme. Sama autorka je schopna nacházet stále nová a nová vysvětlení, spojitosti, symboly a znaky ve své tvorbě, proto není divu, že její poezie není jednostranná, ani samozřejmá, co se významu a pochopení týče.

Cílem této bakalářské práce je zaměřit se na několik tematických okruhů, které se nabízejí při analýze tohoto textu. První z nich je pohled na Ní Chuilleanáin v irském kontextu, kde i přesto, že se nachází poněkud mimo tok současného proudu básníků a básnířek, je osobností, která figuruje na všech sylabech irské poezie vyučované na tamějších univerzitách. Při mém pobytu na univerzitě v irském Limericku jsem měla možnost blíže se seznámit s tvorbou Ní Chuilleanáin, do které mne uvedl Dr. Aidan O'Malley, profesor této univerzity, který se specializuje na překlady poezie a přednáší moderní irskou poezii. Dále se zabývám metaforami a symbolikou sbírky, další sférou je osobní zpověď básnířky, která se mísí s významy básní, v závěrečné kapitole je analyzována konkrétní báseň.

O Ní Chuilleanáin se sice říká, že píše pro vyhraněnou, až téměř uzavřenou skupinu čtenářů, kteří se nebojí proniknout hlouběji do jejích veršů, ale Ní Chuilleanáin má ve skutečnosti obdivovatele po celém světě od Osla po Denver až po Prahu, kterou navštívila v rámci festivalu *Dnů poezie* v prosinci 2008. Během této návštěvy se mi naskytla příležitost s touto příjemnou, komunikativní ženou a unikátní básnířkou udělat rozhovor, který jsem přidala jako přílohu k této práci a který slouží jako jeden z hlavních zdrojů pro následný

rozbor této sbírky. V irském kontextu je Ní Chuilleanáin velmi váženou osobou, jelikož se pohybuje na tamější básnické scéně více než čtyři desetiletí, přednáší na prestižní Trinity College a jejímž životním partnerem je známý básník Macdara Woods. Do irské poetické kultury zapadá především svým zájmem o irský folklór, který je jedním z nejstřeženějších pokladů irské kultury. V tomto ohledu se velmi podobá básnířkám s obdobnou zálibou pro folklór, například Nualle Ní Dhomhnaillové, které dokonce s pomocí Medbh McGuckian přeložila irsky psanou sbírku *Vodní koník*. V rozhovoru s Patricií Boyle Haberstroh Ní Chuilleanáin dokonce přiznává, že má zájem o různé staré artefakty, které lidé skladují na půdách tak dlouho, až se o jejich původu nic neví a dokonce se na jejich existenci zapomene. Tato záliba ve starožitnostech a věcech s neznámým původem dost možná pramení z její profese, která je spojena s výukou historie. Ní Chuilleanáin se mi svěřila se svou intenzivní zálibou v kostelech a domech různého architektonického druhu i stáří. Tyto domy a budovy se velmi často zobrazují v jejích básních, kdy dochází v podobném prostředí ke střetu se spirituálnem či osobní vírou a dost často také krutou realitou.

Realita je plátno, na které Ní Chuilleanáin črtá své poetické vize, jelikož věří, že je potřeba dodržet určité ‚normy pravdy' při psaní povídek a básní, aby byly uvěřitelné. Sama do své tvorby vkládá veliké množství osobních detailů a tajemství, které čtenář může odkrýt, pokud zná informace o jejím životě a zejména dětství. Prvotní nápad psát o jeptiškách a jejich životních útrapách a radostech pramení ze zkušeností Ní Chuilleanáin z dob kdy byla ještě dívkou. Měla v té době v rodině tři tety, které se staly jeptiškami a odešly do kláštera do zahraničí. Paradoxně nebyly tyto tři ženy vůbec spoutány tím, že odevzdaly svůj život Bohu, naopak se v těchto básních projevuje, jak tato zkušenost dívky obohatila do té miry, že se osamostatnily a nabyté zkušenosti využily v dalším životě. Ní Chuilleanáin dokonce vzpomíná na jednu svou příbuznou, která názorově oponovala biskupovi a zcela plynně a rozvážně s ním hovořila francouzským jazykem. Od toho okamžiku se tato žena, jeptiška, pro Ní Chuilleanáin stala symbolem vzdělanosti, odvahy a indiviuality.

O Ní Chuilleanáin se někdy mluví jako o básnířce, která dokáže osvětlit tmu minulosti a zároveň si v básních umí posvítit na ty, jenž se nenacházejí běžně v záři reflektorů. O svém rozhodnutí zahrnout minulost svých tet do své tvorby říká: „Mohla jsem bývala psát například o své matce, která byla spisovatelkou. Přišlo mi to však jako příliš obyčejné téma. Kdežto poté, co jsem začala tvořit básně o jeptiškách, zdálo se mi toto téma neotřelé.

Myslím, že lidé byli celkem překvapeni, když zjistili, že píši právě o jeptiškách.“[1] Ní Chuilleanáin se dále přiznala, že někdy tvorba básní nejde silou vůle udržet na uzdě, občas je básnická kreativní síla silnější než vůle spisovatele a rozhodnutí nakonec ani není na něm, ale je to výsledek tvůrčího procesu, který jako by nabyl vlastní síly.

Ní Chuilleanáin umí předvést celou škálů působivých metafor, které se v této sbírce působivě vyjímají. Využívá kontrastů barev, hry světla a stínů, metafor budov a stavení, přírodních objektů jako luk, lesů, potoků, mraků, vod a dalších odkazů, některých s religiózním kontextem. Zejména jeden významný náboženský reliéf se čtenářům představí v básni se jménem „The Real Thing,“ čili „Skutečno,“ či „To pravé.“ V této básni se nám představuje Ní Chuilleanáinino filozoficko-estetické cítění pro vlastní tvorbu básní. Jeptiška, která v básni figuruje, drží v ruce střep reliéfu Nestoudného hada , který byl inspirací pro pojmenování celé sbírky. Tato Sestra věří v to, že střep, který drží v ruce, je důkazem její víry a v určitém slova smyslu definuje tento střípek i její ženskost a výsostné bytí. Pro básnířku je nesmírně důležité, že had se objevuje jen na střípku reliéfu, protože tvrdí, že záměrně nikdy nepředkládá před čtenáře celý hotový obraz, nýbrž počítá s určitou spoluprací, s jejíž pomocí je čtenář schopen jednotlivým řádkům porozumět. Stejně tak i v životě není nic předloženo definitivně, člověk se učí rozhodovat a analyzovat střípky symbolů kolem sebe. Pro Ní Chuilleanáin nese tato přirozená fragmentace zásadní význam a v jejích básních nenajdeme nikdy jasnou zprávu, naopak jsou mnohdy ambivalentní, nebo si dokonce i protiřečí. Ve sbírce *Nestoudný had* je však mnoho básní, které končí v duchu optimistickém, kde se zračí možnost regenerace a naděje.

Básně jsou protkané složitými odkazy na náboženské mýty a symboly, ale mnohdy se v této sbírce zračí i události z básnířčina osobního života. „Tuto sbírku jsem začala psát v roce 1989, kdy těžce onemocnila má sestra, takže některé básně jsou o jejím utrpení. Básně psané od roku 1994 jsou pak o poslední nemoci mé maminky, takže proto má sbírka ten tvar, jaký má.“[2] Tyto souvislosti zkoumá třetí kapitola práce.

---

[1] Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, „Rozhovor s autorkou,“ 14. Lis. 2008.
[2] Ní Chuilleanáin, „Rozhovor s autorkou.“

Poslední okruh mé práce se týká rozboru jediné básně, a to „A Hand, A Wood," v překladu „Jedna ruka, jeden les." Tato báseň se zabývá právě nemocí Ní Chuilleanáiny sestry, kdy se pomocí veršů básnířka se smrtí své blízké vyrovnáná a začíná věřit, že její duše žije dál v přírodě, kterou milovala, také v ní samotné jako sestře, která jí byla i vzhledově velice podobná a také ve vzpomínkách a v básních, které teď píše.

Ní Chuilleanáina sbírka *Nestoudný had* je naplněná překrásnými metaforami a symboly, které potěší trpělivého čtenáře. Zároveň se zabývá důležitými problémy dnešní společnosti jako postavením ženy i víry dnes, a to osobní i křesťanské. také problematikou neuchopitelnosti historie a nemožnosti citově nezabarvených vzpomínek na minulost, která je nepostižitelná a pomíjivá, stejně jako fragmenty pravdy, které denně v poezii i v běžném životě nacházíme. Zároveň básně ve sbírce odkazují na irskou folklórní tradici a zvyky, avšak ne natolik, aby zastínily kouzlo, které si mohou vychutnat čtenáři nejen v Irsku, ale i v celém literárním světě.

Upon opening Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's collection, *The Brazen Serpent* (1994), one notices that the individual poems are the wrong side up and that the page numbers are at the top of the page, beginning at the back. In order to read the poetry, one is forced to flip the mustard-colored cover over and rotate the book by one hundred and eighty degrees. This simple movement could be perceived as an act of warning suggesting that *The Brazen Serpent* deliberately eludes analysis. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin as a poet has "always enjoyed a select but discerning readership,"[3] comprised of those who have bravely flipped over, sometimes rotated, but always opened her books. As a matter of fact, the unique format is revealed to be nothing more than a printer's error: "a great surprise to me," Ní Chuilleanáin remarks, when shown a copy and even adds, "You could get a new [copy] for free, probably."[4]

Although one should never judge a book by its cover, some readers are discouraged by the religious mosaic on the front of the book which seems to suggest that *The Brazen Serpent* is a collection dealing solely with religious issues and religious history. However, this collection is as diverse as the mosaic which decorates its front: *The Brazen Serpent* incorporates mysticism, the feminine perspective and many other contemporary issues as well as reintroducing the topic of religion which has become a marginalized subject in late twentieth-century poetry. In the following analysis of the collection my intention shall be, in addition to introducing the author and placing her work in the Irish context, to explore three themes: the brazen serpent as a metaphor for Ní Chuilleanáin's entire collection, with special attention to recurring metaphors and symbolism as well as exploring the relationship between history and truth in Ní Chuilleanáin's work and her treatment of the feminine, including a close reading of the poem "A Hand, A Wood." My greatest aid while dissecting the poems and exploring the themes shall be the Spring/Summer 2007 issue of *The Irish University Review* which is dedicated to Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and includes a wide range of essays, each touching upon a different aspect of Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry. Also, it was possible for me to conduct a personal interview with the poet which I have included in the

[3] Anne Fogarty ed., "Introduction," *Irish University Review*, Volume 37 Number 1 (Dublin: Colourbooks Ltd., 2007) viii.
[4] Eileán Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author, 14 Nov. 2008.

appendices, as it has become a rich source which offers answers to the many questions which Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry poses. In addition to these sources I shall be looking to criticism of Ní Chuilleanáin's work as found in various analyses of her work by Irish and non-Irish authors.

My intention is to analyze Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's collection from a multitude of angles, including an excursion into the metaphorical spiritual world which is can be found between the covers of *The Brazen Serpent.* The themes of religion, subjective and objective truth, personal history, the domestic, the feminine perspective, symbolism, biblical allusions and the human psyche are all, among others, to be explored as Ní Chuilleanáin touches upon them in her collection. My aim is to illuminate *The Brazen Serpent* from various perspectives and also weave it into the greater context, especially that of Irish poetry and culture, where there is a growing tradition of female poets who form a distinct group. A multitude of views shall be shown and will enable the formation of one's own perspective of her work. Therefore, any preconceptions regarding for example the inaccessibility and elusiveness of Ní Chuilleanáin's work which may have existed will be challenged and perhaps even overturned, much like the poems themselves in the unintentionally innovative format of Ní Chuilleanáin's *Brazen Serpent.*

1. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin in the Irish Context and the Feminine Perspective

"Anything hollow or enclosed can suggest the feminine, a body that contains and then reveals."[5]

Brief biographical background of the author and her place in the Irish poetic tradition. The question of religion as a theme with specific focus on the role of nuns in the collection and the religious history which is incorporated. Why does Ní Chuilleanáin stand at the edge of the poetic tradition?

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin was born in the city of Cork in 1942 and has been writing and publishing poetry for almost four decades. *The Brazen Serpent* is her eighth collection of poetry and others include *Acts and Monuments* (1972), *Site of Ambush* (1975), *Cork* (1977), *The Second Voyage* (1977), *The Rose Geranium* (1981), *The Magdalene Sermon* (1989), and *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer* (2001), also her *Selected Poems* were published in 2008. Ní Chuilleanáin is also known for her translations of poetry such as *The Water Horse: Poems in Irish by Nualla Ní Dhomhnaill,* with translations into English by Medbh McGuckian and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (1999) and also translations from the Italian of Michele Ranchetti and the Romanian Ileana Malancioiu. Today she lives in Dublin with her husband, the poet Macdara Woods and teaches at Trinity College. Her position in contemporary Irish poetry has been viewed as somewhat peripheral; Anne Fogarty, for example, classifies Ní Chuilleanáin as "a distinctly Irish poet in terms of her preoccupations, heritage, and aesthetic," [6] but notes that she "still stands alone and apart."[7] Justin Quinn writes about her creative voice and passion for history which in "maintaining the silences of the past was

[5] Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, "Interview with Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin," *Irish University Review*, ed. Anne Fogarty Vol. 37 (Dublin: Colourbooks Ltd., 2007) 42.
[6] Fogarty viii.
[7] Fogarty vii.

often too successful, producing poems for an esoteric circle of one."[8] Ní Chuilleanáin's position is on the 'outskirts' of the poetic scene is partly deliberate, I believe, and partly due to circumstance; her work can be difficult to decipher but she herself is aware and, to certain extent, in control of this, "I think the centre [of the poem] is never quite there. Or, if I know what is at the centre, I might well choose not to say it because I don't think that is worth the point,"[9] she says.

As a woman poet, especially one beginning to publish as early as the seventies, she found herself on the periphery before the new development evolved, later joining the mainstream. Today it is possible to say that the women poets of this generation hold a firm recognizable position in the Irish tradition, even though they were in the past often defined through their 'otherness.' Margaret Homans explained in 1980, "The major literary tradition normatively identifies the figure of the poet as masculine, and the voice as masculine property, women writers cannot see their minds as androgynous, or as sexless, but must take part in a self-definition by contraries."[10] Since then, our thinking and our definitions of women authors, specifically Irish women authors have been changed by the women poets who have become an inseparable and central part of contemporary Irish literary culture. It would be unimaginable for a modern Irish poetry class to exclude poets such as Eavan Boland, Nualla Ní Dhomhnaill, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Medbh McGuckian and others from the modern Irish poetic canon. In many ways Ní Chuilleanáin's position in the Irish context is similar to that of the aforementioned poets and a comparison can be made especially to Nualla Ní Dhomhnaill, as Ní Chuilleanáin herself comments: "Thematically, I would be quite close to Nualla Ní Dhomhnaill, who comes after me, because of things like my interest in the language. We both have a strong interest in folklore and in the discipline of folklore […]."[11] A parallel can also be made with Medbh McGuckian who worked with Ní Chuilleanáin some ten years ago on the translation of a collection of Nualla Ní Dhomhnaill's Irish language poetry.

---

[8] Justin Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry, 1800 – 2000 (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 200) 173.
[9] Haberstroh "Interview with Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin," 42.
[10] Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1980) 11.
[11] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.

There are similarities between Ní Chuilleanáin and other Irish poets but I believe that again a conscious decision is made by the author to stay true to her own principles without the need to imitate anyone: "I think when I really admire an Irish poet, I'm inclined to read him or her a lot and then go and do something different. "[12] Although she readily admits that her reading of a number of poets has inspired her greatly, Ní Chuilleanáin's style of poetry is unique and stays true to itself. She speaks of her inspiration as follows:

> I admire very much, for example, [as well as Ní Dhomhnaill] another Irish language poet called Máire Mhac an tSaoi, she is much older. She would now be eighty-six, I think. I'm drawn to Irish language poets and women poets and she and Nualla would be the ones that would be important to me, and Pearse Hutchinson. I think to some extent the people who started [the literary magazine] *Cyphers*, we were a group where we had been friends for a long time and they include another elderly poet now, also eighty-six I think, called Leland Bardwell, who's not very well known as a poet though she's quite well known as a prose writer, and my husband Macdara Woods.[13]

An aspect of the poems which ties Ní Chuilleanáin into the Irish perspective is her incorporation of elements of folklore. She comments on her use of this traditional form of narrative which dates back to ancient history and is fundamental for the Irish culture: "it is also the folklore or the folk tale element that is very close, in that a lot of religious narrative is very folkloric."[14] The Irish folklore tradition incorporates a great deal of genres from legends, jokes, proverbs, blessings and curses and is known for its generous selection of saints, festivals and traditions celebrating these. The way in which the Irish folktale tradition infuses her poetry makes Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin a distinctly Irish poet. It has especially in recent years become a nationalistic trait for Ireland to preserve its traditional corpus of stories and huge efforts have been made to collect them. It is even this effort to collect and

[12] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[13] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[14] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.

categorize the stories and folktales which fascinates Ní Chuilleanáin, who is not only captivated by folklore itself but also "in the discipline of folklore because of the way in which folklore is collected and the way in which it's classified."[15]

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin is even further tied into the Irish context through her inspiration by *The Book of Kells*, which is regarded as a masterpiece and national treasure. The source of inspiration which flows from this book are the relics which it contains. "A relic is something you enclose the reliquary in something else. In Trinity there is an exhibition beside *The Book of Kells*. The book satchel is in leather, which is meant to protect, and there is a shrine, which in turn is meant to protect the book."[16] The fragmentation of images which connect and create new meanings is evident. "The shrine is very highly decorated with precious things because the book is precious, but that, of course, makes it rather dangerous to be carrying around."[17]

To focus on some of the ways in which Ní Chuilleanáin separates herself from other Irish authors, it must be noted that *The Brazen Serpent* as a collection delves into the sphere of religion and religious history. In addition to that there are numerous subject levels ranging from religious imagery, to faith, death, God, or language and it is the poet's decision to focus on these themes which places her apart, especially the choice to incorporate religion in general as a theme into her poetry which Ní Chuilleanáin speaks of in an interview with Patricia Boyle Haberstroh:

> […] what really attracted me always was the surface of religious life. […] And I think that very much leads into my poetry. The way in which religious rituals and religious groupings, like the Confraternity or the convent or whatever, sometimes provide metaphors for life; to me anyway they always seem to

[15] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[16] Haberstroh "Interview with Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin," 41.
[17] Haberstroh "Interview with Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin," 41.

> provide powerful metaphors, and that could be partly because of my background, the nuns, the family and all.[18]

Ní Chuilleanáin elaborates on her choice of this borderline topic during my interview with her: "In a way I didn't decide it. I spent a great deal of time trying to avoid the topic. I write about it because it offered me a way of getting away from a lot of stereotypes people have about nuns. "[19] Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry is very much about allowing a multitude of voices be heard, "I could have written about my mother since she was a writer but that would have been very obvious. The nuns, it seemed to me, were not obvious. People were slightly surprised when they found me writing about them,"[20] Ní Chuilleanáin explains. As Justin Quinn writes, "[Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry] listens hard at the silences of history and other people's lives." [21]

The theme of religion is also closely tied to Ní Chuilleanáin's own life and childhood since she came into contact with the church at a young age when a number of her aunts became nuns. Through these female relatives she became acquainted at first with religious communities so perhaps it was only natural that she should reach towards this topic, even if a majority of poets have desisted from incorporating this into their work. "It seemed an original way into a subject, to have a nun, "Ní Chuilleanáin admits. What is also not negligible and without doubt contributes to her choice of subject matter is her immense expertise in the field. "My academic research is quite connected with religious history and in fact, *The Brazen Serpent* was written when I had been reading a great deal about seventeenth-century regulations for nuns […]."[22] Then again, perhaps 'choice of subject matter' is an awkward formulation since often what one writes about is less volition and rather necessity. In this respect, 'the religious' in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry is complemented, if not overshadowed by her concern with the human psyche and the personal history as it unravels with its many consequences, "I think, for me, it is very much about the social and

---

[18] Haberstroh "Interview with Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin," 38.
[19] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[20] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[21] Quinn 172.
[22] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.

psychological organization as well as the spiritual dimension," [23] she confesses. Also, the religious aspect does not merely or strictly allude to Christianity but can rather be understood universally. While interviewing Ní Chuilleanáin, Patricia Boyle Haberstroh notes as she addresses the poet, "I was also thinking that one did not necessarily have to understand what you were writing about in regard to Christianity to understand what you were saying […] in terms of transcending a particular religion."[24]

What is fascinating about the depiction of nuns in the collection is that in many ways they are more 'in charge,' more independent than other women. Paradoxically it may seem that they represent female empowerment. This is primarily because joining the convent was not necessarily something which was confining, on the contrary, Ní Chuilleanáin speaks of her relatives in terms of their achievements and accomplishments, many of which were enabled by entering the convent. She says of her aunts:

> They were French speakers and they had learned French just because they went into the convent. [..] One of them ended up running a convent in Belgium and then she went back to Ireland, determined to open a home for old people where married couples could go together because that was unknown in Ireland at the time. […] Of course she was quite right about it because it was dreadful when couples had to separate if they needed to go into a place they would be taken care of. And she fought with the bishops of Ireland and, unfortunately the bishops won; they didn't want her to do it.[25]

It is apparent that entering the convent could offer 'a way out' for women, an open door to opportunities which may have been difficult to find, the poet describes the situation in her family: "One part of it was, of course, that they came from quite a poor family and if there was any education the boy was going to get it. My father got everything. They really got nothing. They could have had little jobs […] but I think they wanted something wider.

[23] Haberstroh "Interview with Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin," 38.
[24] Haberstroh "Interview with Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin," 38.
[25] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.

Also of course, their mother had seven children in eight years and that I think this is one of the reasons why none of them ever married as they must have felt a little disposed to that kind of thing." [26] At the same time, the position of these women was certainly difficult in a whole range of aspects: "[…] one of the things that the counter-reformation did was to attempt to impose a much more rigorous seclusion on nuns. That's in the poem *The Brazen Serpent* where the bishop has the windows bricked up,"[27] one of the poems which I discuss.

The Brazen Serpent is an intensely personal collection for Ní Chuilleanáin as she maps the domestic and private spheres of her life through her creative voice while linking her experiences to the use of religious imagery and motifs. Family history is a deep source of inspiration for this collection and the author probes deeper into her heritage to excavate the life stories of relatives from the time of her childhood, as well as projecting her more immediate experiences, such as the death of her mother and sister into her poetry. The collection takes on a very specific form which is molded by the events in her life. Ní Chuilleanáin comments on the layout of the collection, "I started writing it in 1989 which is when my sister was taken ill and so some of the poems are about her illness. And the poems from 1994 are about my mother's final illness, so that's what gives it that particular shape. […] So, I mean, it is a book that has a shape but it's a shape which is largely dictated by those two events in my family."[28]

A fascinating aspect of *The Brazen Serpent* is the imagery and its versatility in various viewpoints: feminist but also sociopolitical and psychoanalytical. The critic Nicholas Allen describes "the compositional care of Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry, the learned, at times esoteric, range of its allusions, and the complexity of its vocabulary,"[29] while touching upon the issue of translation and language which are important themes in Ní Chuilleanáin's work as she defends the Irish perspective. The best and most cited example is her poem titled "Studying

[26] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[27] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[28] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[29] Nicholas Allen, "Each Page Lies Open to the Version of Every Other: History in the Poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin," *Irish University Review*, Vol. 37, ed. Anne Fogarty (Dublin: Colourbooks Ltd., 2007) 22.

the Language" where the speaker takes on the observer of foreign languages and attempts to learn them. Although the poem concludes *The Brazen Serpent*, the author reveals that it was in truth one of the first of the poems she composed in this collection: "It was written and almost ready for the previous book *The Magdalene Sermon*."[30] The feminine perspective is examined especially by Clair Wills in her book titled *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* as well as by a number of authors who contributed to the *Irish University Review* issue dedicated to Ní Chuilleanáin. These authors analyze and interconnect the woman writer in history to the female poetic statement. Forces at play in the poetry are the dominant versus the passive, the chaotic versus the linear; opposition as a theme in Ní Chuilleanáin work.

When it comes to other major themes in her work, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's collection *The Brazen Serpent* contains poetry which works on a symbolic level but is at the same time extremely personal and connects closely to the events and the observations of the poet's life, in addition to being studded with intriguing symbolism and metaphors. There are images and themes which are repeated again and again throughout the thirty-three poems of the collection: religious and biblical references and allusions; there is much play with colors and textures, death, nature, specific plants and animals, music, weather, water and tides; the opposition of light and darkness. To elaborate on one of the prominent themes which are threaded through the poems, it seems that Ní Chuilleanáin is fascinated with light as she references it constantly in her poems, praising it, "Now light scatters, "[31] a thread catching the light,"[32] "lit by the glow," [33] "in the glow of the votive lamp," [34] "in a library where the light is clean." [35] Darkness, too, plays a role: "He remembered the night," [36]

[30] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[31] Eileán Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Architectural Metaphor," *The Brazen Serpent* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1994) 14.
[32] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Glass Garden," 20.
[33] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Real Thing," 16.
[34] Ní Chuilleanáin, "La Corona," 17.
[35] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Following," 32.
[36] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Hair," 12.

"Crests and shadows of the hills," [37] "in darkness breathing hard," [38] or "a flock of starlings had darkened the sky." [39]

Colors and textures are vital in the text as they tint the meaning with various tones of emotion and symbolism. The color white, commonly associated with peace, innocence, pureness and tranquility, is often mentioned: "The white sheet of history,"[40] "pure white gown,"[41] "a screen, white against a window"[42] "The square of white linen,"[43] "stiff white feathers,"[44] "the room is full of the stuff, sticky/ White as a blue-bleached sheet in the sun,"[45] "Two men in white djellabas gravely smoking,"[46] "a white habit"[47] and other colors also, such as yellow: "By yellow fields of rape,"[48] "the yellow sour blooms,"[49]gray: "the grey hags in the corner,"[50] blue: "the dark blue bottle,"[51] "They shone bluish against the red brick walls,"[52] "In the blue shadow,"[53] and others: "the silver commas of the shrine,"[54] "ivory lids parting / Behind lids of gold,"[55] as well as interesting textures including various kinds of clothing and fabrics and numerous mentions of paper: "thick coats,"[56] "the cap in his fingers,"[57] "trailing skirts,"[58] "bleeds as dry as paper,"[59] and "weathered paper."[60] Various

[37] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Bee and the Rapeseed," 27.
[38] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Passing Over in Silence," 23.
[39] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Woman Shoeing a Horse" 33.
[40] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Real Thing," 16.
[41] Ní Chuilleanáin, "No Loads/ No Clothing/ Allowed/ In the Library," 26.
[42] Ní Chuilleanáin, "No Loads/ No Clothing/ Allowed/ In the Library," 26.
[43] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Following,"27.
[44] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Party Wall," 40.
[45] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Vierge Ouvrante," 36-7.
[46] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Posting," 40.
[47] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Following," 32.
[48] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Bee and the Rapeseed," 27.
[49] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Bee and the Rapeseed," 27.
[50] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Witness," 43.
[51] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Glass House," 21.
[52] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Party Wall," 40.
[53] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Bee and the Rapeseed," 27.
[54] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Saint Margaret of Cortona," 24.
[55] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Our Lady of Youghal," 33.
[56] Ní Chuilleanáin, "'Following her coffin in a dream…'" 30.
[57] Ní Chuilleanáin, "'Following her coffin in a dream…'" 30.
[58] Ní Chuilleanáin, "In the year of the hurricane…'"31.
[59] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Real Thing," 16.
[60] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Real Thing," 16.

smells and sounds are created in the poems: “the floated offal, the burnt patches,”[61] “rape honey floods the plain,”[62] “She smells/ The rapeseed sharply fenced in fields,”[63] “the dry fragrance of tea-chests,”[64] “their joints crackle,”[65] “clicks of forks,”[66] “And a dull sound carried all that distance, / The bells around the necks of the leaders,”[67] “my mother shouting,”[68] “a soft rattle,”[69] even taste: “to drink lemonade in the kitchen,”[70] “whiskey poured out in two glasses,”[71] “The dry throat remembers thirst,”[72] “sour blooms,”[73] “The virgin’s almond shrine.”[74]

Other recurring motifs are bones and the skull, ashes, clouds, water pools and streams, bruises and other violent imagery, salt and blood, angels and saints, animals, books, as well as paper, rock, stone and nature, including plants, trees, hills, streams, woods and forests, many buildings, rooms, cellars and stairs, fire, flame, burning and demolition, cloths and threads of clothing. Many body parts are mentioned and day-to-day tasks such as cleaning and farming are listed, connecting the spiritual sphere of ideas and ideals to the domestic one of hard work and reality. The underlying connecting force of the two spheres is memory and the hope for a better future which is apparent in many of the concluding lines of the poems: “the child wrapped and cradled, / Fostered after the storm,”[75] “The grass has grown back, the horses are breeding there again,”[76] “And at last the fresh fine grass / That had started to grow under the first arch / Of the bridge beside the burnt-out paper-mill.”[77]

---

[61] Ní Chuilleanáin, “Passing Over in Silence,” 23.
[62] Ní Chuilleanáin, “The Bee and the Rapeseed,” 27.
[63] Ní Chuilleanáin, “The Bee and the Rapeseed,” 27.
[64] Ní Chuilleanáin, “All for You,” 19.
[65] Ní Chuilleanáin, “Studying the Language,” 47.
[66] Ní Chuilleanáin, “On the Day,” 44.
[67] Ní Chuilleanáin, “The Pastoral Life,” 39.
[68] Ní Chuilleanáin, “A Witness,” 43.
[69] Ní Chuilleanáin, “That Summer,” 41.
[70] Ní Chuilleanáin, “The Pastoral Life,” 43.
[71] Ní Chuilleanáin, “Following,” 32.
[72] Ní Chuilleanáin, “’Following her coffin in a dream…’,” 30.
[73] Ní Chuilleanáin, “The Bee and the Rapeseed,” 27.
[74] Ní Chuilleanáin, “Our Lady of Youghal,” 33.
[75] Ní Chuilleanáin, “In the year of the hurricane…’”31.
[76] Ní Chuilleanáin, “The Pastoral Life” 30.
[77] Ní Chuilleanáin, “The Secret” 42.

2. The Brazen Serpent as a Metaphor for Ní Chuilleanáin's Entire Collection

An analysis of the symbolism of the brazen serpent, its role as a metaphor for the entire collection as well as the circumstances of the naming of the collection.

The second sphere of analysis is that of the brazen serpent and its role as a metaphor for the entire collection. The brazen serpent is a symbol which is explicitly planted in the collection and stands as a title, harnessing the collection as a whole. However, it also appears separately as a symbol in the individual poems, such as "The Real Thing," bringing forth a dichotomy of meanings which instigate an investigation through close reading and research of the roots of the biblical phenomenon – one which remains veiled in the depths of mysticism, yet at the same time is a symbol which we see every day on the emblem of the pharmaceutical industry. I aim to examine the cultural significance of the brazen serpent and its symbolism as it ties into the sphere of the sacred, the anchor of the collection.

As the name of the collection the brazen serpent is a force which might act as a key, it could hypothetically represent or connect the poems in some way, perhaps form some sort of conclusion or departing point for analysis. In connection to the naming of the collection Ní Chuilleanáin recalls, "My American publisher and my Irish publisher – neither of them liked the title when I called it *The Brazen Serpent*. The American said, 'Everyone will think of D. H. Lawrence' and the Irish publisher said, 'Everyone will think it's to do with being a brazen hussy.'" [1] It is apparent just how important it was for Ní Chuilleanáin to show her perspective and opinion, taking no heed of the cultural preconceptions which the readers of her work may have had, as implied by the publishers. She kept the title she had proposed to her publishers but decided eventually to include a citation from the Book of Numbers in the Old Testament as a gesture to clarify that the title was indeed a biblical reference. The brazen serpent as a biblical symbol therefore implores those who study *The Brazen Serpent* as a collection to explore the diversity of roles and meanings of this vital symbol and

[1] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.

especially the role it plays next to other metaphors and symbolism used in the collection, both religious and secular.

Reading the collection I was under the impression that the elusiveness of the brazen serpent as a metaphor was partly in the fact that it was a symbol which was mystical but also appeared on the emblem of the pharmaceutical industry: the contradiction of a myth which is 'hidden in the open.' This dichotomy, between the biblical serpent and this image which is so often seen in the simplified versions of the flashing green neon of drug stores, yet not often noticed for its true symbolism, formed a fascinating type of metaphor which works on many levels. Although this was not an intention of the author, Ní Chuilleanáin comments on this symbolism which is connected to the serpent:

> The Serpents of Asclepius are also serpents wound around a stick, but I think one is biblical [the Brazen Serpent] and the other is classical. They both may come from the same sort of mythological source and there are other snake myths as well, and dragon myths and even something like the dolphin coiled around the anchor is a bit like that also. I wasn't thinking of that but of course, they are both connected with healing so the serpents of Asclepius are quite close and […] there are those Renaissance mythographers who believed that a lot of classical myths were based on the time that Moses spent in Egypt.[2]

A similar dichotomy can be found in the serpent itself as being capable of both destroying and healing. "An opposition." Ní Chuilleanáin explains, "The serpent bites and then the serpent cures. […] Also the image is a strong theme in a lot of medieval religious imagery because it's taken to be an image of the crucifixion and in the Renaissance as well and there is also a Michelangelo version of the brazen serpent in the Sistine Chapel."[3] (see appendix 1 for an illustration of these phenomena.)

[2] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[3] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.

Regarding the symbolic number of the poems – thirty three, it seemed that this cipher, vitally important in Christianity, was planted intentionally. However, this too is a coincidence, like the format of the rotated poems. "I noticed as well that there were thirty-three poems in the collection, one of the vital religious numbers. So are you interested in the significance of numbers and numerology? Was that on purpose?"[4] I asked the author. "No, that wasn't on purpose," Ní Chuilleanáin admits, "that's just got to do with the idea that people have that you need at least thirty poems to make a book. I wouldn't *swear* that I didn't count them up and think that thirty three is a good number […]," she adds, smiling.

The brazen serpent is depicted in the poem "The Real Thing," which has been mentioned, where a literal fragment of the relic of the serpent is what fuels the soul of a nun with hope and joy as she prides herself in her faith of the authenticity of the shard which she possesses, a treasure to her. The nun "exposes her major relic, the longest/ Known fragment of the Brazen Serpent." [5] The verb 'expose' is powerful when used to describe the actions of a nun, one who is pure and keeps herself covered from view, sealed off. The fragment is a representation of the nun's faith in its authenticity; by exposing the relic, she is in fact exposing and her faith. "The Real Thing" is a very particular poem to this collection because I believe that the message contained in it represents Ní Chuilleanáin's concept of faith and projection of this faith into poetry. She speaks during our interview of a poem which was not yet finished at the time. Ní Chuilleanáin was intending to base the poem on a monastery in County Kerry:

> I'm trying to write a poem at the moment about the Great Skellig in County Kerry. It's a rock about ten miles off the coast and no food can be produced on it. There was a monastery there up to year 1000. How the monks lived there and what they survived on nobody has ever worked out but the monastery is still there and it's beautiful, it's perfect. I'm trying to write about the experience of being there. I'm using that as an image because it's a large, calcitrant and

[4] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[5] Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Real Thing," 16.

> ultimately unknowable fact that there is this lot and there is this monastic settlement and we don't understand why or how, but it's real. [6]

The similarities between this not yet finished poem about the Great Skellig in Kerry and "The Real Thing" are evident as both deal with an elusive and ungraspable time in the past which cannot be scientifically proved or disproved. Both are shrouded in mystery. The relic of the serpent is like the monastery which stands in Kerry to remind us of the past and what may or may not have happened there. What is important is what we *believe* to have happened and what we accept as our own truth. In both cases the images are fragmentary and we never know enough information to piece the past together, all we get are hints: we know that monks survived thanks to the remnants of the monastery but it seems impossible for them to have been able find food supplies with the lack of vegetation in the rocky ground, and so the relic too offers a version of the past and is a reminder of this history, though it is our job to analyze it and make sense of the message which is recorded in its fragments. The nun understands this message and accepts this fragment as proof of her faith.

Catriona Clutterbuck analyzes "The Real Thing" by connecting the hidden fragment of the serpent to the historical oppression of women, "a nun exposes a relic of the old testament serpent as a paradoxical means of resisting the veiling of womankind in guilt and silence after the Fall." [7] We are able to draw a parallel between the fragment and the female perspective which has been remained hidden for so many centuries and this is tied to female sexuality as the nun "veils it again and locks it up," [8] suggesting that she is in control of her body. More importantly the fragment alludes to religious belief itself and its representation in the female perspective; it is hidden to the eye, it is also "veiled" and "locked up" from within and, as Clutterbuck explains, "the 'torn end of the serpent' is 'the one free foot kicking / Under the white sheet of history,'" [9] alluding to the powerful concluding line of the poem. In connection to the religious connotations of the brazen serpent and the Bible, the

---

[6] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[7] Clutterbuck 32.
[8] Ní Chuilleanáin "The Glass Garden," 20.
[9] Clutterbuck 32.

fragmentation of the serpent which appears is an important issue: “There is a major passage in the Bible where the brazen serpent is deliberately broken up and so it’s important in the poem “The Real Thing” that is should only be a fragment and the book, I suppose, is about the fact that you get the real thing but you only get a bit of it. You can’t hope to have the whole of the image in any one moment,”[10] Ní Chuilleanáin explains.

The fragmentation of the serpent relic is a typical trait in the collection and can be observed in many of the poems, for example in “The Glass Garden,” where the very title is composed of this fragile material and a subdued voice is presented as saying, “And I’ve been inside the house beyond the trees/ Cut and lying in segments,” [11] also in the poem “In the year of the hurricane...” where the collapse of the world is depicted as breaking up, fragmenting and disintegrating, the tide lapping at the old only to create a fresh beginning: “The high-waterline scored in rock/ Begins our lives again. / Below it lace of tidemarks/ Washed like nets, with trimming/ Of cork and foam, the trailing skirts/ lapping and overlapping.”[12] Ní Chuilleanáin confesses that she is drawn to “the bits and pieces: the prayer books, manuals, holy pictures, the holy water fonts, all those things that get thrown out whenever anyone dies in Ireland.” [13] Paradoxically, fragmentation is a theme which holds the collection together and the notion was even projected into the title, as Ní Chuilleanáin explains, “I was thinking of the biblical brazen serpent and especially of the fact that it’s an image of an image. Things like that stained glass version of it there, “she says, pointing to the colorful illustration of a circular stained glass window depicting the serpent, which decorates the front cover of her collection, “is an image within an image and I think that is what I meant.”[14] (see appendix 1 for illustration.)

[10] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[11] Ní Chuilleanáin “The Real Thing,” 16.
[12] Ní Chuilleanáin “In the year of the hurricane..,” 31.
[13] Haberstroh “Interview with Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin,” 38.
[14] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.

3. History as a Hologram:

The Relationship between History and Truth in Ní Chuilleanáin's Work:

"An obsession with history, of course, is understood to be a defining Irish characteristic." [1]

Examining personal history as well as religious and general history, especially the stories which Ní Chuilleanáin brings to light in The Brazen Serpent and their connection to religion, truth, perspective and knowledge.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin described her relationship with history in her work in an interview with Haberstroh, "I think I have been captivated by history, in a way that the majority of Irish people have a certain historical bent, even if it is only going back to the discovery of secrets of their neighbors. I think then of the past for me, even the past of childhood […]. I suppose it is that sort of hologram where now you see it, now you don't, now you see further into the background and then you don't - that fascinates me about history,"[2] she describes her stance with the use of a colorful metaphor. In her essay "The Architectural Metaphor in the Poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin," Haberstroh then claims that for Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin "history is not only a journey into the past but also a key to the present." [3] I reflect upon this statement in my analysis of the collection, for the history portrayed in *The Brazen Serpent* is personal to Ní Chuilleanáin as well as a record of male and female truth, as they have historically intertwined, and has a direct influence on the present.

History is brought up many times in the thirty three poems, and the aspect which is highlighted is the subjectivity of it and the way it can be molded and transformed to suit the

[1] Allen 23.
[2] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[3] Haberstroh, "The Architectural Metaphor in the Poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin,"*Irish University Review*, ed. Anne Fogarty Vol. 37 (Dublin: Colourbooks Ltd., 2007) 84.

individual, focusing on events to suit the self. In the poem "The Secret," the truth and perspective in history are explicitly explored: "Instead of burning the book or getting its value/ They hid it and were silent, even at home, / So that the history of that lost year/ Remained for each one her own delusion.[4]" Memory is a phenomenon which is also analyzed and repeatedly mentioned in the poems, with suggestive titles like "The Witness," where the opening lines read: "Can I be the only one alive/ Able to remember those times? What keeps them from asking the others?"[5] Also in a poem which contains some of the most striking imagery of the collection "Vierge Ouvrante" memory is "the long band that bound her like a silkworm's thread,"[6] and it is in the end all one needs and is left with, "Till there is nothing left of the darkness you need / For the *camera obscura*, / Only the shining of the blank chronicle of thread."[7] "Vierge Ouvrante" is about memories so dreadful that one wishes they could be forgotten: "I wrote that after seeing some of the photographs that were not shown from a war situation. For various reasons I happened to see them. I shouldn't probably have seen them. […] Reality is… well, there is too much of it and it's hard to cope with,"[8] she admits.

The speakers of the poems seem to exude the female experience, whereas the observers are typically male, most evidently in a poem which seems to explore the male perspective, the poem "Man Watching a Woman." What is clear as this poem unravels is that the women are bound, conformed and restricted in a way which the male cannot understand, he is free to roam wherever he wants, free to think of his own entertainment: "He can move on, while the night combs out / Long rushing sounds into the quiet, / On to the scene, the wide cafés – "[9] whereas the woman, sowing late into the night in a refectory grows old as she works, on one spot, stagnant, "Dropping into fatigue, severity, age."[10] However, the female in the poem is actually the one who holds the power over the man:

---

[4] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Secret," 42.
[5] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Witness," 43.
[6] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Vierge Ouvrante," 36.
[7] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Vierge Ouvrante," 37.
[8] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[9] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Man Watching a Woman," 38.
[10] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Man Watching a Woman," 38.

"He stops and watches. He needs to see this,"[11] watching her "He is comforted."[12] The female figure in the poems is often portrayed as strong and independent just as the nuns which Ní Chuilleanáin is proud to have had in the family; women who pursue their goals, women leaders, who make their own decisions in life.

Very often, in fact, there is a mention of 'her' without any further explanation, a simple indication of the female perspective, a journey into the sphere of the woman. However, not all is a question of gender; in "Studying the Language" the speaker observes speakers of other languages, the others. "I listen to their accents, they are not all / From this island, not all old, / Not even, I think, all masculine,"[13] and Ní Chuilleanáin herself admits that, "Sometimes I don't want the 'I' to be all that gendered. Rather I don't want it be inside a feminine person; sometimes I think it can be more detached."[14] She later elaborates on the subject of 'the gendered voice': "I [...] admire Tom Kinsella very much also but I think of him too as having a very masculine voice which I couldn't imitate which is not true of Hutchinson and the same of Montague. I admire how it's done but it's not quite what I would do I think."[15]

Ní Chuilleanáin explores truth in history via the role of religion in poetry in general as she returns to this subject matter which has, as previously stated, been neglected to a certain extent in contemporary poetry. In this manner Ní Chuilleanáin is making a statement, reviving sainthood in ordinary day-to-day situations; she connects history as shards of domestic situations, as in the poem "The Tale of Me" where the speaker's life is analogous to the process of making bread, passing on the know-how to the younger generation, "she traces with her eye her mother's hand."[16] The bread is much more than food - it is a living entity which represents the oppressive forces which history lays down on us and it is also, of

[11] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Man Watching a Woman," 38.
[12] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Man Watching a Woman," 38.
[13] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Studying the Language," 38.
[14] Haberstroh, "Interview with Eilean Ní Chuilleanáin" 43.
[15] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[16] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Tale of Me," 18.

course, another of the most important Christian symbols, "The breathing, slackening, raw loaf/ That tried to grow and was twisted and turned back – ."[17] There is a man in the next room of the ordinary home who is alluded to as the biblical Adam, connecting spirituality with the natural course of life as he lies dying. "My story is knotted and sour like the bread she made,"[18] the poem concludes, piecing the individual truth with a universal one of faith.

Truth is central in Ní Chuilleanáin's collection and excavating this truth, subverting false representations and bringing to light what is misrepresented or not represented at all, is at the very core of her poetic creation. "I think poetry does equal truth, but in a very particular way," Ní Chuilleanáin states. "It has to be the kind of truth that does not exclude fiction. I think the truth of poetry consists partly in not saying more than you mean; not inflating something to say more than it actually means. I dislike falsification in poetry. […] I feel all art should respect truths of fiction."[19] Catriona Clutterbuck believes that Ní Chuilleanáin aims to present pure symbols, cleansed of dishonesty, cleansed of lies, "her volume *The Brazen Serpent* centres around the efficacy of any dominant icon of falsity to cure the damage done by falsity." [20] The knowledge of history which was an integral part of Ní Chuilleanáin's academic career is also linked to what we believe to be the truth in poetry.

In portraying the feminine in her collection, Ní Chuilleanáin crosses borders and times, her representation is complex and moving and the story which she shares is genuine, enlightening, public and also private. Wills remarks that "poetry cannot simply add the private of personal experience of women to its dominant structures," and alludes to Eavan Boland who famously concluded that the female experience is outside history. "Boland does not so much represent female experience as trope it," Wills adds. "This desire to celebrate female personal truths arises out of a confusion regarding the status of privacy and the domestic in relation to the public national image of femininity."[21] Ní Chuilleanáin's

[17] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Tale of Me," 18.
[18] Ní Chuilleanáin, "The Tale of Me," 18.
[19] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[20] Clutterbuck 32.
[21] Wills 59.

representation goes against the typical perception of femininity and the way it could be constructed; in a way in her subject choice she challenges the stereotypes, "which people had, I think especially in the fifties and sixties. When you asserted the feminine presence, you were being noisy, you were being… strident, is the word that would be used very often and that this would switch everybody off. Or else you could be very discreet; 'airy-fairy' and feminine in a different sort of way and I didn't want to do either of those things."[22] Catriona Clutterbuck comments about the situation of the feminine in Irish poetry as follows: "As with most other areas of the Irish cultural endeavor, in the field of women's poetry the result is that the 26-county Republic is not accepted in its function as criterion of identity but neither is it actively rejected. Instead it is ignored."[23] In her work Ní Chuilleanáin is very consciously avoiding the typical ways of analysis of female identity.

Also, Irish society around the author was changing rapidly and the position of the woman in her religious, social and political position was being challenged. Gender became an important element which changed the ways of analysis and a new wave of women authors surfaced which represented a different view of femininity and its representation. Clare Wills explains: "Much recent poetry by women has been marked by a rejection of the conservative politics associated with the stereotypical images of Ireland […] and a drive to represent the real history and experiences of Irish women in their stead." [24] She elaborates on the shift of the private female experience into the public sphere: "Far from being contained within the confines of the home, women (the female body, sexuality, and reproduction) are at the centre of public policy and legislation."[25] It is true that Ní Chuilleanáin reaches into a sphere below such a surface - the motifs are domestic and there is a sense of order in the way in which the entities are presented. Many times the masculine in the poems is offensive, oppressive, binding, even dangerous and violent, as in "The Glass Garden": "I've been in the orchard where/ Holding long crooked guns/ Massed men in steel caps" [26] and "She kept the secret of the woman lying / In darkness breathing hard, / a

[22] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[23] Clutterbuck 17.
[24] Wills 49.
[25] Wills 50.
[26] Ní Chuilleanáin, "*The Glass Garden,*" 20.

hooked foot holding her down. She held her peace about the man who waited / Beside the lettered slab. "[27]

Ní Chuilleanáin is preoccupied with representation and perspective, this is evident particularly in her mention of glass in poems titled "The Glass Garden," and "A Glass House," where glass, as a symbol of transparency is, in fact, used to represent perception, misinterpretation and the way we look at the world. The very act of looking is a dominant theme in both these poems. The two poems complete each other; they seem to mirror themselves on the opposite pages which they are printed on. Self-representation and the molding of self perception are explored, "a cloud floats, puffed into the shape of myself,"[28] and restraint which is present in the poems, "a hesitant voice, a breathing/ Silence binding, tracing me," the silence of women, both in a personal and public sense. The voice is clearly feminine in its submissive tone; it is searching for its own representation in a world which is anything but transparent, though as fragile as glass: "Open to the tides, I am sinking/ Past open globes of eyes." [29] Truth is concealed, "The dark blue bottle on the laundry shelf, / The label turned to the corner. "[30] The self is explored as the speaker refers to themselves as "cut and lying open in segments," presenting a vulnerable image of the self which is left for others to explore, interpret and piece together. In the end, however, this proves impossible as in the very language of our definitions, we are unable to understand each other, those around us are a different species, and their speech is but a rustling: "Crates of racing pigeons wait/ Rustling on a platform. How far do I need to travel/ To understand their talk?"[31] Thus the poem concludes with a question mark.

[27] Ní Chuilleanáin, "Passing Over in Silence," 23.
[28] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Glass House," 21.
[29] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Glass House," 21.
[30] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Glass House," 21.
[31] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Glass House," 21.

"The dates you mark in the diary come and pass:"[1]

4. The Personal Dimension: A Close Analysis of the Poem "A Hand, A Wood."

Having discussed Ní Chuilleanáin's relationship to history, truth and the way she projects her personal life into her poetry, the final sphere of analysis shall be a close reading of the poem "A Hand, A Wood" which is the second to last in the collection. "I have always thought of "A Hand, A Wood" as not being successful because all the details in it are real," Ní Chuilleanáin explains. "After my sister died her husband went away for a while and then he came back to the house and I had gone over to see if I could help."[2] The poem is closely connected to the actual flow of events which followed the death of the poet's sister and the poem has absorbed the sadness and mourning, making it powerful, and haunting. It is written in two parts, one is defined through the image of a hand, the other through an image of the wood, as the title implies.

"After three days I have to wash - / I am prising you from under my nails,"[3] the poem begins, drawing us into the aftermath of the death of a loved one. "It starts with my hand, and I did feel that after her death, every time I washed them that I lost a bit of her."[4] The verb 'to prise' is loaded with anger and hurt, suggests teeth clenched in resentment, despair and sadness over the loss. "The tracks, their branching sequence,"[5] alludes to the disease which Ní Chuilleanáin's sister suffered from – a brain tumor:

> The hand [is there] because she was a violinist and she got a brain tumor, so two things happened. First of all she lost the use of her hands and then also, well, violinists, the skin on their fingertips gets thickened and she was ill for six months

[1] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Hand, A Wood," 46.
[2] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[3] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Hand, A Wood," 46.
[4] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[5] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Hand, A Wood," 46.

> and her skin became very soft, she said how strange that was. […]The tracks are the track of the brain which you lose, and the skill of the left and right hand, which is where her skill was. [..][6]

The word 'tracks' of the line "the tracks, their branching sequence"[7] is a loaded plural in terms of meaning since it can allude to both the direction of moving forward and also returning, it is a path laid out for a certain purpose yet to be revealed, or the reminder of something which has already passed by. This dichotomy reminds us that the ways in which the brain works are still mysterious; no matter how far science has progressed it seems that we are left again with faith rather than reason. Diseases of the brain are for this reason and the fact that they are so difficult to cure the most frightening as all depends on how far the tumor or disease has progressed, or branched out. In this sense we realize that there are tracks in the healthy brain also which are often portrayed as a type of tree-structure in simplified diagrams and the branching itself prepares us for the literal branches in the wood where the "Ashes are lodged under the trees."[8]

The most striking line is "Your script curls on the labels of the jars, / Naming pulses in the kitchen press."[9] The metaphor of 'the pulse' works on multiple levels; not only is the handwriting the 'pulsating' force which represents the ended life of deceased woman, her pulse and breath, but also of course the literal pulses such as lentils, through which she still lives, as they represent her since she has held them in her hands. Her presence cannot disappear from the preserved jars as it did from the author's hands when she washed them but even the labels in Ní Chuilleanáin's sister's handwriting begin to peel off and fade with time. Ní Chuilleanáin mentions how difficult it was for her sister's husband to cope with finding these artifacts of her sister's presence, as if she was still alive: "He said it was terrible that you could see things like for example he would come across a note in his diary in her handwriting saying 'remember to get the car tested' and I would look at labels in the spices in the

[6] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[7] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Hand, A Wood," 46.
[8] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Hand, A Wood," 46.
[9] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Hand, A Wood," 46.

cupboard, she had written the labels on everything and we were going though her clothes and wondering what to do with them […]"[10]

The second part of the poem takes place in a wood and it is separated by a number of lines on the page and labeled with the number two to symbolize the time which had passed since Ní Chuilleanáin's sister passed away. "The wet leaves are blowing, the sparse/ Ashes are lodged under the trees in the wood/ where we cannot go in this weather."[11] Again, the verb 'lodged' contains bottled anger, trapped, or wedged, under other feelings. In this way it connects to the first stanza to the verb 'prising.' The woods are the site where the final ceremony took place and in the winter it became impossible to visit the wood: "She was very fond of the house in Italy she had bought and so we, at least her husband and my mother, scattered her ashes in the little wood and that's why we still have the house."[12] Ní Chuilleanáin recalls. "[…] the following year we went and stayed in the house and it was winter and her ashes were in the wood but I couldn't go to the wood. "[13] However, it seems that although it was impossible to venture into the wood where her sister's ashes were kept, Ní Chuilleanáin was able to connect with her sister through memories as she has become a part of nature, a part of the wood. "The birds fly up and spread out"[14] and these represent her sister, she lives on through them in the woods where her remains lay and most importantly, she lives on through her sister as she remembers and writes about her, as is clear in the final three lines: "I am wearing your shape / Like a light shirt of flame; / My hair is full of shadows."[15]

Ní Chuilleanáin's sister lives on in this poem, a memory and a story shared with others and more literally she lives on through Ní Chuilleanáin who resembles her, 'wears her shape' to the extent that the two could be mistaken for each other:

---

[10] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[11] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Hand, A Wood," 46.
[12] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[13] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[14] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Hand, A Wood," 46.
[15] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Hand, A Wood," 46.

> […] to some extent we have *become* her. My brother plays the violin as well, although he doesn't play as well as she did and I *looked* like her. Her husband and her friends, when they were talking to me, I felt that they were really talking to her, very oddly, actually, because he died this year. We went to his funeral and we never got along so well with his second wife but all the people at his funeral were talking about my sister because they were all the musicians who had played with her. I think these people who hadn't seen me for fifteen years, didn't see me, they saw her.[16]

The poem "A Hand, A Wood," is a culmination of the spheres of analysis which have been explored in *The Brazen Serpent:* the female perspective, the aspect of truth in poetry and the personal history which is incorporated into the poem, as well as the faith which concludes it. Just as in the interview which I was able to conduct with Ní Chuilleanáin, the analysis moves from the more general to the personal, even intimate details of family life and death. The poem itself begins with the sterile act of washing, "Reluctantly"[17] more details of the disease are shared with the reader and towards the end a real presence of the sister's spirit in the home can be felt, although this presence of hers appears again in the sterile atmosphere of "labels of jars"[18] and "dates […] marked in the diary."[19] The second stanza introduces the personal sphere which is no longer just memories but the literal remains of the ashes which is a painful detail, especially when Ní Chuilleanáin cannot visit her sister in the woods due to bad weather. The details in this stanza are raw and this complete and detailed exposal may be what led Ní Chuilleanáin's own doubts about the poem which she said was not as well received by certain critics as the other poems of the collection.

"A Hand, A Wood" explores the relationship between women and sisters, alluding to Sisters in the convent and the ties which Ní Chuilleanáin had with her own relatives such as

[16] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[17] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Hand, A Wood," 46.
[18] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Hand, A Wood," 46.
[19] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Hand, A Wood," 46.

her aunts. Faith is vital in the poem, for believing that her sister lives on through her is a method of coping with the loss. Fragmentation also appears in the poem as "The hunters are scattering shot –"[20] which startles the birds which fly up into the sky and "spread out."[21] The Irish perspective in the poem is rooted in the fact that it deals with death, for the wake tradition and the question of the proper rituals of what is to be done after death is one of the strongest in Irish folklore. The tradition of a 'proper Irish Catholic ceremony' is discussed by Ní Chuilleanáin in connection to the poem:" […] my mother would much have preferred if [my sister] could have had a big Catholic funeral service but her husband couldn't have stood it and in the end we decided to have a priest, to have a small service and she was cremated...so what to do with the ashes? "[22]

The poem also includes some of the most important recurring imagery which has been used throughout this collection: there is the mention of water through the stream, texture and clothing is alluded to in the final lines "a light shirt of flame," as is light versus darkness which is a theme interwoven into the poems of *The Brazen Serpent* and nature, trees and leaves are also mentioned. "My hair is full of shadows," the poem concludes, a direct link to Ní Chuilleanáin's own long gray hair. "One of the most striking features about you is this hair which you have. Dr. O'Malley started his lecture [at the University of Limerick] by mentioning your hair which I think has really become a symbol of you as well." I mentioned to Ní Chuilleanáin who responded with a smile: "Yes, I'm afraid so. And as I get older I think what on earth I'm going to do about it. It has to stay for the moment anyway."[23]

In Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry, one cannot hope to see all of the image at a single moment but rather one gets a glimpse of a fragment. We can only guess what the 'flame' of the metaphor "a light shirt of flame" [24] represents and even in our interview, Ní Chuilleanáin offers no clues to the meaning of this, retaining that bit of mystery which is so typical of her work and her aesthetic. Numerous explanations are possible: the flame could be the burning

[20] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Hand, A Wood," 46.
[21] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Hand, A Wood," 46.
[22] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[23] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[24] Ní Chuilleanáin, "A Hand, A Wood," 46.

sensation of loss in connection to the tragedy but it could equally represent the ashes which came of the literal fire of cremation. Also, the flame in connection to the ashes could lead the reader to the idea of the phoenix and the resurrection of Ní Chuilleanáin‘s sister’s memory through Ní Chuilleanáin herself, tying back to the birds which rose up from the woods where the ashes were buried and to the general feeling of enlightenment and hope which can be found in the final stanzas of numerous poems of the collection.

5. Conclusion

Ní Chuilleanáin's collection *The Brazen Serpent* is fascinating on many levels and deserves a broad readership. However, due to the author's reputation for elusive and impenetrable poetry, the collection has not been as widely appreciated as it could have been had the readers been brave enough to flip and rotate the cover and dedicate to the collection the time and effort which the poems call for. The main dissuasion may seem to be the fact that the collection is deeply inspired by religious imagery and faith. However, in the analysis of the collection, it has been shown that although the poems are connected to the theme of religion, including topics such as nuns, the sacred versus the secular, saints and relics and other similar themes, there are many other layers of meaning which are hidden and have been excavated with the help of critical publications, interviews with the author and systematic close reading of the texts. This analysis of *The Brazen Serpent,* which incorporated biographical information, the Irish context, the feminine and feminist aspect, history – both personal and religious, aspires to be a useful tool for the better understanding of the rich symbolism contained in the poetry in its many layers of meaning. As was evident in the personal interview which I conducted with Ní Chuilleanáin, the poet is open to new interpretations of her work and encourages the reader to find their own symbolism in her poetry as well as generously explaining her own motives and inspirations.

An exploration of themes such as Ní Chuilleanáin's elusiveness, elements of folklore, the gender of the speaker, the concept of memory, or the typical perception of femininity have led to a better understanding and perhaps to some sort of grasp of Ní Chuilleanáin's aesthetic which is projected into the type of poetry which she writes. Topics which she delves into are the female empowerment of nuns in connection to her family situation and history, she explores the brazen serpent as an entity which holds the poems together and works as a metaphor for the collection and the various cultural motifs which are connected to it, she is fascinated with religious allusions, looks to fragmentation as a connecting principle and explores memory, truth and perspective in her poems.

Ní Chuilleanáin is clear when it comes to the principles which she incorporates into her work. She states in connection to her attitude to poetry as one of the founders of the literary magazine *Cyphers*: "We would feel about poetry that truth is important, writing about international things that are not just standard Irish themes. "[1] In this aspiration the poet is undoubtedly successful as *The Brazen Serpent* is a powerful collection of poetry which transcends the female or Irish context and stands as an independent, rich, deep and inspiring work of literature.

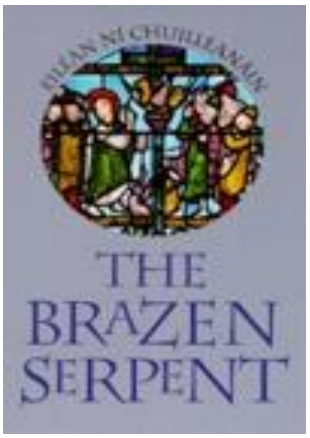
[1] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.

Appendix 1: Visual Representations of the Brazen Serpent and other imagery connected to this phenomenon, as described by Ní Chuilleanáin.

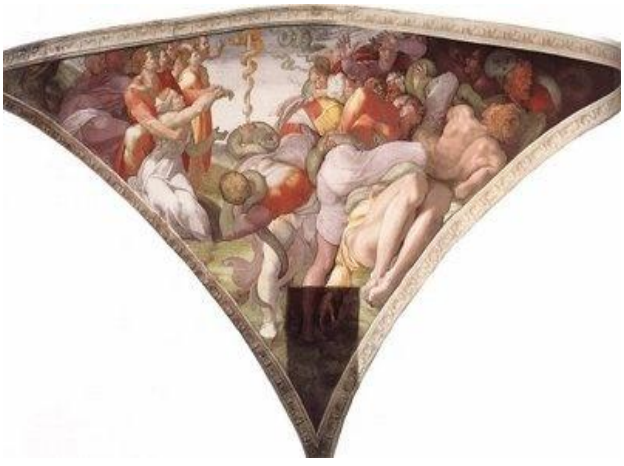
I.

II.

III.



VI.



I. **The Serpent of Asclepius** coiled around a rod. Asclepius was a figure in ancient Greek mythology who was known to practice medicine; for this reason the rod is known as being depicted on the emblem of the pharmaceutical industry.

II. **The dolphin coiled around an anchor**, another symbol which ties into the imagery of the serpent and serpent-like creatures, similarly to the dragon which Ní Chuilleanáin also explicitly lists as belonging to these.

III. Ní Chuilleanáin's collection *The Brazen Serpent* where an illustration of **a stained glass image of the serpent** is painted on the front cover of the book: "An image within an image."[1]

IV. Painted in 1508, **Michelangelo Buonarroti's famous fresco of the Brazen Serpent** in the Sistine Chapel in Vatican. "The image is a strong theme in a lot of medieval religious imagery because it's taken to be an image of the crucifixion,"[2] Ní Chuilleanáin writes.

---

[1] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.
[2] Ní Chuilleanáin, Personal interview with the author.

Appendix 2: Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's visit to Prague in November 2008

Photograph of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's and the author taken at the Irish Embassy in Prague, November 14th 2008.

Appendix 3: Interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

Prague, Czech Republic.

The following is an interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin conducted at Café Montmartre by the author upon Ní Chuilleanáin's visit to Prague on November 14th, 2008.

Alžběta Skrbková: So first of all I would like to ask about the format of *The Brazen Serpent* because I think that most readers are quite surprised when they pick it up since the poems are actually upside-down.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin: Well, I think that there must just be something wrong with the copy that you bought. You could get a new one, probably, for free.

A.S: Oh, really! Well, Justin Quinn actually has a copy like this as well.

E.C: Really?

A.S: Yes, he does!

E.C: [laughs] Well, that's very interesting. I have to say it's a great surprise to me.

A.S: I have to admit most of my introduction actually deals with this intriguing format of the collection! I write here that, “In order to read the poetry, one is forced to flip the mustard-colored cover over and rotate the book by one hundred and eighty degrees. This simple movement could be perceived as an act of warning which implies to the reader that *The Brazen Serpent* in its format deliberately closes itself up from analysis.”

E.C: I don’t think my publisher would have put up with any such conceit.

A.S: Well, I do say later that we should avoid preconceptualized conclusions, I suppose. [laughs] Well, that answers question one. I was going to ask whether it was a conscious decision of yours while you were writing this book, so it suffices to say that it wasn’t on your mind. Moving on I’d like to ask you about the religious imagery which is threaded through the entire collection. I was intrigued by the comments you made about your aunts this morning. [At Ní Chuilleanáin’s reading at the Irish Embassy in Prague earlier that day] You stated that, “those who went into the convent led more independent lives than those who did not.” Would you mind detailing the experiences which made you decide to incorporate this topic in your poetry?

E.C: Well, as I said today, in a way I didn’t decide it. I spent a great deal of time trying to avoid the topic. I write about it because it offered me a way of getting away from a lot of stereotypes people have about nuns. Especially which they had, I think, in the fifties and sixties: the idea that if you asserted the feminine presence you were being noisy and *strident* is the word that would be used very often and this would switch everybody off. Or else you could be very discreet and airy-fairy and very feminine in a different sort of way and I didn’t want to do either of those because it didn’t seem to me to be related to this.

I suppose my experience with my aunts included the fact that they were French-speakers and they had learned French just because they went into the convent and then they went to France. One of them ended up running a convent in Belgium and she came back to Ireland determined to open a home for old people where married couples could go together because that was unknown in Ireland at the time. She had run a place like that in Belgium and she thought it was needed. Of course, she was quite right; it was dreadful when

couples had to separate if they needed to go into a place they would be taken care of. And she fought with the bishops of Ireland and unfortunately the bishops won; they didn't want her to do it. So the fact that they were enterprising and had initiative really came out in their convent lives.

One part of it was, of course, that they came from quite a poor family and if there was any education the boy was going to get it. My father got everything. They really got nothing. They could have had little jobs […] but I think they wanted something wider. Also of course, their mother had seven children in eight years and that I think this is one of the reasons why none of them ever married as they must have felt a little ill-disposed to that kind of thing. It seemed to me an original way into a subject, to have a nun.

The other thing is that my academic research is quite connected with religious history and in fact, *The Brazen Serpent* was written when I had been reading a great deal about seventeenth-century regulations for nuns, in particular, one of the things that the counter reformation did was to attempt to impose a much more rigorous seclusion on nuns. That's in the poem "The Brazen Serpent" where the bishop has the windows bricked up.

Another thing was that I was once present when one of my aunts was having an argument with her chaplain about the Algerian war because he was French and he wanted her to get rid of certain teachers and to give their jobs to people who were being repatriated from Algeria called the Pied-Noirs and I just remember how furious she was and how she was able to express herself in a language that was not her first language and that impressed me. This offered a version of the feminine for me. I could have written about my mother since she was a writer but that would have been very obvious, whereas the nuns, it seemed to me, were not obvious. People were slightly surprised when they found me writing about them.

A.S: Yes, and it seems to me that, for example, in the poem "The Real Thing" this femininity that you are speaking of can be found in the power of knowing that the relic which the nun [depicted in the poem] holds is authentic, it is the 'real thing' for her. Do you

suppose this would be an instance that would exemplify the type of feminity which you wished to portray?

E.C: Yes, I think so. Yes, definitely.

A.S: Also, I can see that your writing about this particular subject would be surprising to people since this topic, especially in the twenty-first century, or rather late twentieth century when you wrote this collection...well, it's not a topic that could be considered mainstream in any way. What is fascinating for me in *The Brazen Serpent* is the imagery which is in the collection. Some of my personal favorites are the buildings which you depict, also the nature and earth. I also picked up on the numerous different types of textures and fabrics such as the lace and the cotton which I really liked. But the dominant image for me is that of the title – the image of the brazen serpent. I'd like to focus on the title and its significance since I believe it links the poems together and I also think that it puts your work into the Irish perspective. Is that true?

E.C: Well, I was thinking of the biblical brazen serpent and especially of the fact that it's an image of an image, things like that stained glass version of it there [pointing to the artwork on the cover of the collection] is an image within an image and I think that was what I meant. What did you think was Irish, the fact that there are snakes in the *Book of Kells*?

A.S: That's certainly true but I was actually looking back to the citation from the Bible which you included on the first page here. When I looked at it a bit closer I thought that perhaps a parallel could be drawn between Moses freeing the people and the Irish oppression. It signified a type of liberation, spirituality and faith, and healing as well.

E.C: I don't think so, though Moses is often invoked in the context of rescuing the people out of slavery. I'll tell you why the citation is there. My American publisher and my Irish publisher – neither of them liked the title when I called it *The Brazen Serpent*. The American said, 'Everyone will think of D. H. Lawrence' and the Irish publisher said, 'Everyone will think it's to do with being a brazen hussy.' I thought they were both ridiculous and I was later talking to a friend of mine and she said, 'Well why don't you just put the bit from the

bible in and then people will know what it's about.' So putting in the quote was an afterthought but the theme of Moses and the brazen serpent was there all along. There is a later passage in the Bible where the brazen serpent is deliberately broken up and this idea is important in the poem 'The Real Thing'- that it should be only a fragment. And the book I suppose is about the fact that you get the real thing but you only get a bit of it. You can't hope to have all of the image in any one moment.

A.S: Also, if I'm correct, the brazen serpent as an image appears on the logo of the pharmaceutical industry – the snake around the wooden stick.

E.C: I think that's a classical serpent.

A.S: Not the brazen serpent? It's the serpent of Aesclepius on the rod.

E.C: No, I don't think so. Though the serpents of Aesculapius are also serpents wound around a stick, I think one of them is biblical and the other one is classical. Now they may both come from the same sort of mythological source, I mean, there are other snake and dragon myths as well. And even something like the dolphin coiled around the anchor is a bit like that also but I wasn't thinking of these. Of course, both of these serpents are connected with healing. The serpents of Aesculapius are quite close. Now that I think about it, there are those Renaissance mythographers who believed that a lot of classical myths were based on the time that Moses spent in Egypt but I wouldn't pursue it very far. It is a possibility though, I wouldn't rule it out.

A.S: Yes, I really liked that image in particular when connected to the aspect of healing and rejuvenation because I recall learning in biology class back in middle school about the Asclepius rod being a representation of a certain type of parasitic worm from ancient times. The long body of this worm was wound round and round on a wooden stick and it was important not to break it to remove the whole thing.

E.C: Is that right?

A.S: Yes, and those 'healers' practicing this type of elaborate procedure would have been predecessors perhaps of today's physicians. Though I'm not quite sure where this

pharmaceutical image came from as there are various versions detailing its origin but this one alluded to the images of flesh on wood and healing and for that reason I was reminded of it.

E.C: No, I hadn't thought of that. It was also about healing through an opposite: the serpent bites and then the serpent cures.

A.S: Yes, yes, the concept of the pharmakon.

E.C: Yes, and it's a very strong theme in a lot of medieval art because it's taken to be an image of the crucifixion and in the Renaissance as well, I mean there is a Michelangelo version of the brazen serpent in the Sistine Chapel.

A.S: Yes, I've been to Vatican to see his frescos. And speaking of crucifixion, I noticed as well that there were thirty-three poems in the collection, one of the vital religious numbers. So are you interested in the significance of numbers and numerology? Was that on purpose?

E.C: No, it wasn't on purpose.

A.S: Was it not? [Laughs]

E.C: No, that's just got to do with the idea people have that you need at least thirty poems to make a book. I wouldn't swear that I didn't count them up and think that thirty-three is a good number [laughs] but I would never put a poem into a book to make up thirty-three. The layout of this book I could explain. Now *I* have to remember to turn it over [opening the book and seeing the upside-down format]. I started writing it in 1989 which is when my sister was taken ill and so some of the poems are about her illness. And the poems from 1994 are about my mother's final illness, so that's what gives it that particular shape. The oldest poem in the book is in fact is "Studying the Language". It was written and almost ready for the previous book *The Magdalene Sermon*. So, I mean, it is a book that has a shape but it's a shape which is largely dictated by those two events in my family.

A.S: Yes. Patricia Boyle Haberstroh…

E.C: She's the person who suggested putting in the Bible quote by the way.

A.S: Oh, really? Well, she recently wrote about your poetry in the *Irish University Review* that "history is not only a journey into the past but also the key to the present" in your poetry. History is in fact of the major themes which I decided to explore in my analysis of your poetry: the authenticity contained in the poems and the connection of poetry and truth, truth and history and knowledge and history. I'm wondering whether you think that poetry should always equal truth?

E.C: Yes, but in a very particular way. I mean, it has to be the kind of truth that does not exclude fiction. I think that probably the truth of poetry consists partly in not saying more than you mean, not inflating something to say more than it actually means. To assert what it actually means. I dislike falsification in poetry, I had an argument with the English poet P.J Kavanagh because he was writing a poem about Edward Thomas called "Edward Thomas in Heaven" and he included an Anglican purgatory and I said to him, "But Patrick, Anglicans don't believe in purgatory, read the Thirty-nine Articles." But he liked the expression so much he kept it in anyway and I feel all art should respect truths of fictions. You know, if you write a short story that has a waiter in it and you want him to have some kind of disability, you can't give him horny hands because waiters don't have horny hands, they have smooth hands but they can have smooth feet. I think you have to think about the realities that you're writing about and after that, there is the transformation which can often be quite radical.

A.S: Hmm, that reminds me of an article I read recently about a Czech film director called Vorel who was quoted as saying that it's impossible to film reality because no one would ever believe what you were showing. It's so much more *un*believable than something you construe.

E.C: Well, I think there's something in that. I think reality can often be more awful than anything you can construe. For example, people object sometimes to the publishing of photographs of war but the photographs that you see are never as awful as the ones that are taken and the people say, "I can't publish that, it's too dreadful." The poem called

“Vierge Ouvrante” I wrote after seeing some of the photos that were not shown from a war situation. I just for various reasons happened to see them. I shouldn’t probably have seen them. You realize then how people almost feel they should mediate the real impact because reality is... there’s too much of it and it’s hard to cope with.

A.S: Yes. My favorite poem from *The Brazen Serpent* is “A Hand, A wood.”

E.C: Oh really?

A.S: Yes. I very much like the line “Your script curls on the labels of jars”

E.C: Yes.

A.S: I feel like that line is very powerful, it shows the passing of time and the suppressed emotion peeling away but also it is very gentle in a way. But very powerful. Would you mind telling me about how you wrote this particular poem and the circumstances that led you to write this poem in particular?

E.C: Well, to an extent that contradicts what went before. I’ve always thought of that poem as not being successful because all the details in it are real. After my sister died, different members of my family went to help her husband. She died in London and there was always one of us there with her. And then after she died he went away for a while and then he came back to the house and I had gone over to see if I could help. He said it was terrible that you could see things like for example he would come across a note in his diary in her handwriting saying ‘remember to get the car tested’ and I would look at labels in the spices in the cupboard, she had written the labels on everything and we were going though her clothes and wondering what to do with them and he discovered that there was a hostel for battered women that always needed spare clothes to give them so we gave them there.

So it’s actually quite a factual poem. It ends then with the wood which is because she was cremated and then my mother would much have preferred if she could have had a big catholic funeral service but her husband couldn’t have stood it and in the end we decided to have a priest, to have a small service and she was cremated…so what to do with the ashes?

She was very fond of the house in Italy she had bought and so we, at least her husband and my mother, scattered her ashes in the little wood and that's why we still have the house.

A.S: So then the hand would represent the scattering of the ashes in the wood?

E.C: The hand [is there] because she was a violinist and she got a brain tumor, so two things happened. First of all she lost the use of her hands and then also, well, violinists, the skin on their fingertips gets thickened and she was ill for six months and her skin became very soft, she said how strange that was. It starts with my hand and I did feel that when I washed after her death that we were losing a bit of her every time because I had touched her and now she was gone. The tracks are the track of the brain which you lose, and the skill of the left and right hand, which is where her skill was. But also of course, the background of this is the Psalm by the Waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. 'Forget the old Jerusalem, may my right hand be forgotten/ may my right hand lose its coming.' It's translated in various ways. That was intended to recall that.

The wood as I said, well, the following year we went and stayed in the house and it was winter and her ashes were in the wood but I couldn't go to the wood.

A.S: Yes, regarding the visual aspect you can see in this space the time which has passed by here between the two stanzas [points to the gap between stanzas 1 and 2].

E.C: Yes, that's right. The other thing is that my brother felt this too, that to some extent we have become her. My brother plays the violin as well, although he doesn't play as well as she did and I looked like her. Her husband and her friends, when they were talking to me, I felt that they were really talking to her, very oddly actually, because he died this year. We went to his funeral and we never got along so well with his second wife but all the people at his funeral were talking about my sister because they were all the musicians who had played with her and him because he was a musician too. And it seemed very strange and I felt in a way wrong because obviously his second wife, she was there. It was her job to see to the funeral. I think these people who hadn't seen me for fifteen years didn't see me, they saw her. My

nieces were there and other people who looked and sounded like her. So that's something that happened of course, after the poem was written but perhaps it's interesting.

A.S: Yes, of course. And what I felt about this particular poem was the fact that it's tied to the present because of the hair. One of the most striking features about you is this hair which you have. Dr. O'Malley started his lecture [at the University of Limerick] by mentioning your hair which I think has really become a symbol of you as well.

E.C: Yes, [laughs] I'm afraid so. And as I get older I think what on earth I'm going to do about it. It has to stay for the moment anyway.

A.S: Alright so I have just one more question. People have called you a borderline poet and it has been said that even to fit you into a course of contemporary Irish poetry is difficult because you stand alone. I wanted to ask you whether there were any Irish poets who you would feel were the closest to you, thematically or even structurally.

E.C: Thematically I would be quite close to Nualla Ní Dhomhnaill who comes after me because of things like my interest in the language, how we both have a strong interest in folklore and in the discipline of folklore because of the way in which folklore is collected and the way in which it's classified. So that would be part of it. And the hair, of course. She has wonderful hair. The poets who influenced me a lot would include a poet called Pearse Hutchinson who's now in his eighties because he's a very international poet. I think when I really admire and Irish poet, I'm inclined to read him or her a lot and then go and do something different. I admire very much, for example, another Irish language poet called Máire Mhac an tSaoi, she is much older. She would now be eighty-six, I think. I'm drawn to Irish language poets and women poets and she and Nualla would be the ones that would be important to me, and Pearse Hutchinson. I think to some extent the people who started *Cyphers*, we were a group where we had been friends for a long time and they include another elderly poet now, also eighty-six I think, called Leland Bardwell, who's not very well known as a poet though she's quite well known as a prose writer and my husband Macdara Woods. So I think we would feel about poetry that for example the truth is important, that

international connections and writing about things that are not just standard Irish themes is important. I have to say though that when I'm starting to write a poem, I don't think "how would Kinsella write this?" I do admire Tom Kinsella very much also but I think of him too as having a very masculine voice which I couldn't imitate which is not true of Hutchinson and the same of Montague. I admire how it's done but it's not quite what I would do I think.

A.S: This reminds me of what you say in the interview in the Irish University review where you describe that the act of writing a poem is actually a poem in itself, it's just like a poetic process. I mean, when you sit down and start to write, I think it's more than just that, it's something larger than just yourself.

E.C: There has to be something that I find interesting and that I feel would be interesting to other people. I'm trying to write a poem at the moment about the Great Skellig in County Kerry. It's a rock about ten miles off the coast and no food can be produced on it. There was a monastery there up to year 1000. How the monks lived there and what they survived on nobody has ever worked out but the monastery is still there and it's beautiful, it's perfect. I'm trying to write about the experience of being there. I'm using that as an image because it's a large, calcitrant and ultimately unknowable fact that there is this lot and there is this monastic settlement and we don't understand why or how, but it's real.

A.S: I'm sure you'll be able to craft that into a beautiful poem.

E.C: I hope so.

A.S: Eiléan, I'd like thank you very much for taking the time to sit down with me to answer some of my questions. I very much appreciate it and I believe that the information which you've provided me with will help me a great deal in my analysis of the collection.

E.C: You are more than welcome. Thank you.

Bibliography:

Fogarty, Anne, ed. *Irish University Review*. Vol. 37. Dublin: Colourbooks Ltd., 2007.

Homans, Margaret. *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1980.

Kelleher, Margaret and Philip O'Leary, eds. *Cambridge History of Irish Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Ní Chuilleanáin, Eiléan. Personal Interview with Author. 14 Nov. 2008.

Ní Chuilleanáin, Eiléan. *The Brazen Serpent*. Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1994.

Nordin, Irene Gilsenan, ed. *The Body and Desire in Contemporary Irish Poetry*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006.

Quinn, Justin. *Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry, 1800-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Ryan, Ray, ed. *Writing in the Irish Republic: Literature, Culture, Politics 1949-1999*. London: Palgrave, 2000.

Wills, Clair. *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993